

THE LANGUAGE PRACTITIONER AS AGENT: THE IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT GLOBAL TRENDS IN RESEARCH FOR LANGUAGE PRACTICE IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that, whether she recognises it or not, the translator is an agent, i.e. someone with an active hand in the intercultural communication process. This position endows the translator with the responsibility to make decisions in intercultural communication that can have far-reaching ideological effects. For this reason, translators should be educated to be able to take up this responsibility. In this regard, the author proposes the notion of wisdom as the aim of translator education. The article also argues in favour of indigenising and even subverting translations in the African context.

Key words: Translator education; wisdom; intercultural communication; agent; ideology; translation studies; decolonisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent developments in translation studies have been focussing on the translator as an agent. As social and hermeneutic approaches to translation gain ground, it is realised that the translator is much more than someone who switches the language of a text into another language. Seeing that language is conceptualised as language in use, it is always embedded in cultural and ideological structures. This means that the translator cannot merely switch codes, but has to become an agent of sorts, who takes responsibility for choices made in intercultural, interlinguistic communication.

This article will thus be structured along the following lines. First, I shall attempt an overview of the most salient points in current global translation research, i.e. a literature review. I contend that we need to be aware of what world leaders in this field of research are thinking. Our aim is not to copy them, but to know how to position ourselves as Africans in relationship to them. Secondly, I shall attempt to explore the implications thereof for translation practice in the South African context. This section thus entails a critical engagement of the literature. In this process, I shall illustrate my arguments by means of an example from the context within which we work in the Free State. Lastly, I shall indicate some implications for practice, research, and teaching which flows from the main argument of this article.

2. CURRENT TRANSLATION RESEARCH: AGENCY

As a yardstick to determine the agenda of current translation research, I shall refer to the curriculum of the Translation Research Summer School, which is held in the UK annually. I attended this summer school in 2007. My presupposition is that, seeing that the curriculum was compiled and presented by leading scholars in the field of translation studies, I can assume that the curriculum would have reflected the current trends in translation studies. The Summer School draws advanced students in translation studies from across the globe and makes use of lecturers who are at the forefront of research in their respective fields of expertise. The aim is to expose students to the most recent and relevant research being done in Translation Studies, that is, in the Anglophone, European part of Translation Studies where this Summer School is presented. The Summer School was presented in four modules. The first module was about methods in translation research. This was followed by a module on theories of translation and intercultural studies. The third module covered research methods in translation and intercultural studies. The last module was devoted to translation as social practice. Apart from this, Lawrence Venuti read a paper at a public lecture and had a seminar session with students on translation as interpretation. I shall briefly indicate what the most salient points in each module were and what the implications are for translation studies in South Africa.

In the first module, the focus was on travelling theory, i.e. what happens to theory when it travels from its location of origin to other locations across the globe (Miller 1996:207-223; Said 1991:225-247). The basic argument is that in both translation theory and translation itself, there is an agency role. Neither theory nor translation can travel without adapting to new surroundings and without influencing its new surroundings. In this, the translation theorist and the translators are agents who have to decide which changes to make in order to adapt the theory or the text to a particular location. Translators also have to make decisions that will affect the influence that their translations have on the new surroundings in which these translations are to function. The further implication is that translation scholars should not look for universal theories or universal translation practices anymore. Localities determine the nature of theories and practices. In the African context, this would imply that Africans have to consider conceptualising translation in terms of their local cultures and surroundings. Merely borrowing Western translation theories would have a particular influence on African society as the travelling theories are not neutral and without power. The issue is thus how to adapt theories travelling into Africa.

Another strong motive in this module was research done on the power invested in agents of communication in institutional situations. In this case, Jan Blommaert (2004:643-671) reported on the power relationships in interpreting for amnesty seekers in Europe. Whether one agrees with his overall argument or not, he has convincingly argued that not even interpreters can be mere conduits of messages. The context within which they operate – which is often a highly emotional and desperate one – requires more of them than merely saying in another language what someone else has said. Blommaert showed gripping evidence of interpreters' prejudice or compassion playing a positive or negative role in these amnesty applications. The interpreters' own knowledge of the applicants' culture, history, and political situation plays an important role in the process of applying for amnesty and sometimes their empathy or lack thereof can play a crucial role in the life of an individual applicant. It can practically mean the difference between life and death. From this perspective, it is clear that language practitioners are by the nature of their activity agents in communication.

I contend that the South African multilingual environment requires even greater attention to the agency role of translators in matters of daily living, e.g. courts of justice, medical services, and national and local government institutions such as income tax offices, the payment of social grants, and enquiries at local municipalities. These are part of the South African environment that affects the quality of life of every citizen – and even more the poor and uneducated. These situations require language practitioners who are socially and developmentally alert and aware, who view their job as facilitating communication, and who therefore takes responsibility for the acts of communication in which they are agents.

In the second module, it became clear that the history of translation and the methodology by which to describe that history are currently the centre of interest. Actually, one should talk about histories, because the ground-breaking research in this field is currently being done on various histories of translation. This endeavour aims at gaining insight into two main questions. The one pertains to the realisation that current views on translation may be limited because of its Western, European bias. What we thus need to do is to look at history for new, fresh views that may hold more potential for solving current problems in translation studies. Various historical studies are thus being done about translation, for instance, how scientific and technical translation was done in Egypt in the ninth and tenth century after Christ; or the history of how Shakespeare's dramas were translated and received in Arabia.

Translation studies in South Africa have to some extent taken part in this discussion by mainly focussing on Bible translations (Naudé 2005(a), (b), (c), 2002, 2001). Work has been and is being done to come to an understanding of African views on translation (Hanna 2005:167-192).

I am of the opinion that much more still needs to be done, especially regarding the particular role that oral cultures play in the reception of written translations. Orality and the performance aspect related to it need to be accounted for in the translation of oral literature into written form (Conolly 2007). The second field of interest in researching the history of translation is the different cultural conceptions about translation. Scholars have realised that Western translation studies are caught up in a Platonian dichotomy where source text and target text are posed over against one another. In this dichotomy, the target text will always have logical and ideological primacy in terms of Platonian, Western thought. This type of thought about translation leaves one with a number of problems.

One of them is the unequal power relationship between source and target text and the implications this holds for ideological abuse. For this reason, researchers are looking to other cultures for notions of translation that may free them from this fatal dichotomy. For instance, the Brazilian notion of translation as cannibalistic holds that a translation subsumes the source, literally eats it up, and takes from it what is needed to strengthen the target culture. In this view, the target text/culture is the powerful one. A translation is not secondary in relationship to a source, not a colony in relationship to a coloniser, not female in relationship to a dominant male, but a powerful instrument to take what is powerful from other cultures and to subsume it into its own culture. In this metaphor, this view of translation, the translator is a powerful agent who has to make decisions on ways of translating that would prevent the source text and source culture from dominating or colonising the target text or target culture, if that is what is needed.

The third module focused mainly on multimodal translation and corpus translation studies. In both these fields, the focus of the research is on the ways in which translators adapt a variety of texts for new audiences, in new cultures, under new circumstances. Although they are widely differing fields of study, they are both driven by a search for culture-specific translational actions as evident in the texts translators produce. Adaptation raises questions regarding choices and the value system which informs these choices. The fourth module focused on translation as social practice. Mona Baker (2006) convincingly argues that the very nature of human knowledge, and thus texts, is narrative in nature and thus prone to represent a particular perspective. There is no neutral ground, no neutral knowledge, and thus no neutral translation. Every translation is in some way a re-narration, a re-telling of the text. The question is not whether the translator is ideologically involved in the text, but how. In this module, Inghilleri (2007) in interpreting studies and Hanna (2005) in drama translation drew on theories of sociology in discussing features of translation. Of note for my argument is once again not the finer detail of their arguments, but the fact that they relate translation so closely to society that they take up theories of ethnography and sociology to explain translation.

The seminar day by Venuti (2007) focused on the fact that all translation implies interpretation. There is no way in which one can read a text in one language and render it in another without interpreting the source text. It should be obvious that this move complicates translation immensely as theorists of interpretation, amongst other Derrida, has long been arguing that interpretation is not a simple process of peeling off the form/language and getting to the meaning. In many texts, form and meaning are irrevocably connected, which make for complicated interpretation. Even in more communicative texts, the translator still has to interpret the source text. And furthermore, it has been shown that even topics as “objective” as mathematics are embedded in cultural and ideological preconceptions. Although they may be less overtly ambiguous, they are not neutral and cannot be translated without considering the cultural and power relationships between the source and target texts. It should go without saying that this interpretation, which is inherent in all translation, is made with a particular horizon of expectation. Neutrality is thus a misnomer in translation.

All of these approaches have, to my mind, two things in common and these are agency and culture. In academic circles, at least, translation scholars acknowledge that the translator is not a conduit through which the message flows neutrally from one language to another. In fact, they do more than acknowledge. They argue that agency is inherently part and parcel of the identity of the translator, whether the translator is aware of it or not. Though some scholars are just tracing the agency role of translators in a descriptive way, others like Baker and Venuti, though from two different perspectives, are advocating a much more active role for the translator. If a more active agency role is advocated for translators, it will force translation studies to consider the ethical responsibility of this role, the cultural choices implicated in such a role, and the requisite capabilities of translators to act out this role. This, in turn, has immense implications for translator education.

Secondly, translation is no longer viewed as a merely linguistic activity. It is a thoroughly cultural endeavour (Katan 2004). I would go so far as to say that translators are cultural agents. The Sapir-Whorff hypothesis has long ago determined that reality is determined by language, or in the softer version, has a strong influence on perception. Currently, translation scholars recognise that all texts, whether oral or written, are embedded in culture. Whether we do maths, construct buildings, use medicine, or play sport, our knowledge and experience of these phenomena are essentially influenced by culture. To this I now turn in more detail.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSLATION TEACHING, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE IN SOUTH AFRICA

My main thesis is that translation teaching, research, and practice in South Africa should be much more subversive than it currently is.

I am well aware of the fact that translation in itself is a process in which one acknowledges a dependency on others – other texts, other thinkers, other cultures. However, this does not mean that one should allow those texts, thinkers, or cultures to dominate you. Maybe one should substitute the word dependency with relationality by arguing that the relationship between a source text and a target text is not only or merely one of dependency, but that there are other relationships between the two as well (for instance, the notion of cannibalism referred to earlier). Maybe it is precisely our presuppositions on translation which make us think of the target text as dependant on the source text. Part of what I am arguing for is a thorough rethinking of this relationship in African terms.

However, to return to my argument, put in simple terms, translators, scholars, and teachers should be aware of the potential danger that ideology may ride piggy-back on the basis of translations into the target culture. To use a South African image, ideology is like a virus, an AIDS virus that comes along invisibly with the pleasures of life, or with the very life itself. It then takes over the mental immune system, forcing itself onto the thought patterns of the target culture. Eventually it kills, because the life of the target culture is taken over by (a dominant) source culture. Precisely for this reason, Walter Benjamin (2005:16) has argued as early as 1923 that translation is a cognitive endeavour and that there can be no identity between source and target text. In line with Schleiermacher, he and, later, Venuti, have been arguing that the translator as a conscious cognitive agent should not only translate the information contained in a text, but also the form of the language itself. They argued that one should focus on the foreign text when you translate. In their case, they had a specific motive for this.

Especially Venuti is fighting a battle against American/Western hegemony and self-centeredness. From this point of view, it makes sense to argue that when one translates, you should not merely adapt the text to your own culture, but keep it foreign. In this way, the dominant American culture will be subverted by translations that are foreign, not easy to read, and resistant. Or at least, American readers may be forced to read texts that remind them that there are other cultures in the world. That should keep them uncomfortable. Venuti would argue that they do not need fast food when it comes to reading. It is precisely here that I take up Venuti's argument, but turn it around. In South Africa, we do not have the same dominant context as in America. In our case, the danger is not that we are dominating, but that we may be dominated. Especially against the background of the colonisation that all African cultures and languages (including Afrikaans) has experienced, our fight should be one of resistance. Rather than foreignising translations, we should consider indigenising translations. In these translations, we should translate in such a way that we take out of the ST the necessary information we need, without necessarily consuming or ascribing to the concomitant ideology.

In fact, I would argue that translators should be extremely wary of the ideology that may come with their translations. This would ask for translations that indigenise, but also for translations that in some way points to the ideology that comes with it. I base my argument on what Brisset (2005:346) writes about the role of translation in Quebec. The situation in Quebec resembles that of South Africa in the sense that it has to do with minority languages fighting a majority language. She argues that translation should be supplanting foreign forms of expression. Translations should not alienate readers from their culture. It should be done in such a way that the foreign language is replaced by a native language, in all senses of the word. She further argues that translation is an act of recentering, of reclaiming identity. Its aim should be not to inform about the foreign, but to inform in such a way that the cultural language is enhanced.

My argument is that, depending on the situation, translations can either foreignise or indigenise. It is a decision that translators have to make at certain points in history. It depends on the wisdom of the translator or community of translators to read and interpret the context within which they operate (see the work of Baltes 2004). They then need to assess the needs of their context and translate accordingly. This calls for translators who are well-versed in ideology, culture, and community issues. It calls for translators who are educated and skilled in the process of intercultural communication.

Let me illustrate the complexity of this task by using an example. Recently, I was involved in a translation project in which questionnaires had to be translated from English into Sesotho. The questionnaires are part of a research project to ascertain the prevalence of Alzheimer's disease amongst the African population in the larger Bloemfontein area. The client and translators met to discuss the requirements for the translation. At one stage, the questionnaire had a number of questions on female reproduction. One of the questions was about female menopause. The translators indicate that Sesotho does not have an exact word for menopause. In the ensuing discussion, the following came to the fore: There is no exact equivalent on the micro or word level for menopause, but there are ways of talking about it so that all Sesotho-speaking women will understand what is meant. This implies that the researchers would obtain the correct information. One of the translators then lamented the fact that Sesotho does not have words for a term such as menopause, indicating that it obscures communication about issues such as AIDS.

This observation puts up for discussion the exact nature of my argument. A translation is always a power play between (clashing) ideologies. In this case, one has the American/Western ideology which has become totally open about sexual matters. The ideology driving this openness is: knowledge is power. If you know that you are experiencing menopause, if you can talk about it openly, if you can call it by the name, it should be more bearable, easier to manage or cure etc. It rests on a belief in human technology and science.

In the name of this ideology, the deepest nature of being human is, in a critical reading of this view, reduced to knowledge, biological parts, and systems and organs. So, from a certain point of view, one could argue that this ideology is acceptable, even necessary. In fact, one can say that it is the ideology on which the technological success of the Western world has been built. One could argue that this ideology is necessary in the fight against AIDS. As a translator, one can then decide to promote this ideology. This would mean that you create a word for menopause, either by loaning or by some other lexicographic device. In doing so, not only does a translator create a new word, s/he also allows the particular ideology to ride piggy-back on that word into the source culture, Sesotho. In other words, the very fact that one creates a new word here has ideological implications.

On the other hand, one could decide to resist creating a new word. One could argue that you respect the Sesotho way of talking (and thinking) about sexuality and bodilyness. Because of this respect, you then do not create a new word, but use the existing euphemistic ways of communicating. One could argue that you create respect for Sesotho in this regard. One could argue that you resist the domination by the Western culture. However, one could also argue that you lose something. One could argue that there remains an area of human experience that cannot be named and talked about openly and precisely. One could argue that the fight against AIDS does not allow you the luxury of being sensitive to these cultural issues; it has to be fought head-on. But will the fight succeed if you do it in a foreign way. Will you get the message across if it offends or is so foreign as to be incomprehensible? Would it succeed if you alienate people from their culture? Will it succeed if somehow the anti-Aids campaign does not reach the hearts of the people to whom it is directed?

The reader would note that I do not make a choice here. To me, Sesotho-speaking people should make the choice. The point of my argument is that translators have to make these types of choices every day. And whichever way they choose, it will have an ideological effect. My call is thus for translators to be aware of these choices. In-depth discussions about these choices amongst translators should help them to gain the collective wisdom for solving these issues. My call would be for translators to at least to some degree resist Western ideology. This resistive effort should, to my mind, decolonise the minds of Africans (amongst which I count Afrikaans-speaking Africans such as myself). What is more, teachers of translation studies and/or professional translators should take this perspective as a point of departure to informing their curricula and pedagogies.

4. DIRECTIONS

In this section, I am putting forward my views on the implications of the above arguments. The somewhat blunt manner in which it is done should not be construed to mean that I do not have a sense of the complexity of the situation. However, I am trying to clarify certain notions, which can only be done by putting forward my position boldly and then have it refined by the ensuing debate.

Firstly, I would advocate that more historical studies about notions of translation should be done in South Africa. Conolly (2007) suggested that, in South Africa, we should do research on notions of interlingual communication unique to the African communities in this country. What are the unique features of African communication that translators have to facilitate? I suggest that we should get African students to study the notions of translation holding in their language communities. These studies should be empirical, gathering information and perceptions from various levels of society.

Secondly, I propose that the notion of wisdom be explored for use in translation studies. Personally, I have been exploring this notion in a number of papers and intend expounding it to the full in future papers. As cultural mediators, translators need to make choices with immense ideological implications for the language communities in which they work. For them to be competent to do this, they need more than mere technique. They need more than language skill. They need more than cultural mediation skills. To be honest, they need all of these and more. They need the wisdom to be able to judge translation briefs and translation situations. They need the wisdom to be able to judge the needs of a particular society at a particular time in order to make choices in line with those needs. They need to be thoroughly educated in the complexities of society and in the power relationships between language and cultural communities. They need to have the ability to assess situations in which they translate and make complicated decisions with far-reaching implications. They need to steer a community's self image, a language group's esteem. They need to decide when to foreignise and when to indigenise. In this process of decision making, they are extremely powerful, because they are privy to information that the readers of their texts cannot read, i.e. the source text. They need to act with responsibility in exercising this power. It is precisely because I contend that one cannot, like Venuti, argue that all translation should be foreignising, that we need wise translators. We need translators with the ability to make decisions to the advantage of the communities they are related to. What "advantage" means, may differ in different contexts. Translators thus need to be contextually grounded, wise, because they have experience of life itself.

Thirdly, I am of the opinion that translation teaching in South Africa should be engaged in communities.

Community service learning is an example of an approach that allows students to become acquainted with the complexity of translation and the implication of their choices for communities. Translation is much more than an activity taking place in the little black box of the translator's brain. It is also much more than pure science conducted in a disciplinary fashion. It is what some would call Mode 2 knowledge, although this notion is not without contestation. What I am trying to argue is that translation studies cannot be conducted within the narrow disciplinary confines of pure Western science. It is essentially a social activity and the sooner students are exposed to this, the better. It is essentially a form of knowledge that should be gained in the context of application (Schön 1987). It is essentially a form of knowledge that needs to engage in and with a community. It exists in service to a community. It exists, one could say, for the common good of a community. With this I do not imply mere technical training, but theory that engages society in the fullest sense of the word.

Fourthly, translators should be much more aware of their African context. Translators cannot carry on uncritically making use of Western notions of source and target language, of written language, of quality, and of the West's agenda for translation studies. We should ask critical questions on many of the assumptions we hold as fact, e.g. the difference between translation and interpreting or the difference between home language/mother tongue and second language. We should determine an African agenda for translation studies. We should investigate what African notions of translation or intercultural communication entail. We should, as Africans, talk about what would be in the best interests of our societies. In this regard, I am organising a Spring School for Translation Studies in Africa, akin to the Translation Research Summer School in the UK.

Fifthly, community translation has to become a central feature of translation studies in South Africa. I have been questioning the fact that we have only one level of accreditation in South Africa, whereas Australia has three. The social and economic situation in South Africa needs to be thoroughly revisited to rethink how we can make translation available at affordable prices to communities. Highly skilled translators will cost more than municipalities can afford. We need to explore the possibilities of training community translators without leaving communities with distorted information. Firstly, however, we need to go to communities and ask them how they cope in a multilingual society. We need empirical information on communities' perceptions on translations and on the ways in which South African communities receive translations. From that local knowledge we may be able to build some patterns for solving more than local problems.

Lastly, I propose that translation practice, research, and teaching be conducted within a cultural perspective. It is true that many African languages battle with terminology and lexicography.

However, if we were to limit translation practice, research, and teaching to the linguistic dimension thereof, we shall miss precisely the sensitivities I have been arguing for earlier. Granted, translation is about language, but it is about language within the context of culture and ideology. In this regard, translation studies need to collaborate with scholars from Africa Studies, Gender Studies, Anthropology, Development Studies, etc. In this sense, Translation Studies is a thoroughly interdisciplinary field of study (Nel 2007). The mere fact that few if any of these disciplines are actively engaged in a debate with translation studies makes this need even more urgent.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the translator is an agent in communication whether s/he realises it or not. The translator will always be required to make decisions on power, ideology, culture – and that in the form of language choices. I have argued that the African context requires of teachers of translators to teach them to be wise in every sense of the word. I have argued that translator researchers should engage with the African context in every sense of the word.

Most importantly, however, I have argued that translation practitioners should take up the responsibility of being agents. Agents of what, one may ask? The answer to this question will have to be discussed and clarified amongst translators themselves, and between translators and scholars of translation. My indication was that translators in the African context should be agents of subverting pure Western ways of thinking by indigenising Western information into African cultures if that information is necessary and to the benefit of the society. Agents why, one may ask? If translators are not agents of African culture, the whole of South Africa will be westernised within the next century. We shall be speaking Sesotho, but thinking like Americans. We shall be speaking Afrikaans, but acting like English.

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